The latest Harry Potter flick is absolutely killing at the box office this week, and in his review of the film ... Mitch says these are no longer charming children's movies, and the latest film in this series continues down the path of being more dark and disturbing, and in turn, also a better film. Mitch reviews the movie expected to bring in more cash than any other in 2007 in his latest.

Once upon a time, there were these charming children's movies about a pre-teen boy who happened to find out that he was a wizard, and his subsequent adventures in a school that specialized in honing the talents of boys and girls like himself. They were light and whimsical, full of fantastic visuals, cute performances by even cuter kids, and enough "scary" moments to keep the adults interested as well.

Do not confuse "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" with either of those two movies; "The Sorcerer's Stone" and "The Chamber of Secrets". Harry Potter is no longer the cuddly child he was during those films. As played by the ever improving (and impressive) Daniel Radcliffe, Harry is now a teen-ager who is far older than he should be. He is haunted by terrifying memories of the encounter with Lord Voldemort and the death of his friend Cedric Diggory. He has dreadful nightmares and visions of the Dark Lord, all while dealing with isolation, plus the challenges facing anyone going through adolescence. More than any of the other four films, this is Radcliffe's show to carry, for better or for worse. And carry it he does, revealing a talented young

actor who should be a force on screen for years to come.

For those unfamiliar with the books or the movies, there is really no sense in trying to summarize the Harry Potter Universe. To go into this movie without having seen at least one of the previous films would be as futile as trying to figure out what was going on in "The Two Towers" without having ever read Tolkein or seen "The Fellowship of the Rings". The other challenge facing freshman "Potter" director David Yates is that "Phoenix" is author J.K. Rowling's longest book, at 870 pages...and also admittedly the one she found hardest to pen.

From the very beginning, we see that we are in for a different type of story. It starts by following tradition by following Harry's summer activities, which are usually with the Dursleys; his dreadful and abusive relatives. In the past, this would lead to some moments of frivolity as one member or another would get some level of comeuppance prior to Harry's return to Hogwarts. Not this time, though, as Harry and the obnoxious Dudley Dursley are attacked and almost killed by the specter-like Dementors.

Harry's self-defense in the matter results in a trial at the Ministry of Magic for using magic in front of a muggle (mortal) while under the age of 17. And what we find is that the Ministry is in a complete panic stage; not because of what Harry did, but because of what he saw at the end of the last movie; the return of Lord Voldemort. Fearful of what the return of "he who shall not be named" would mean, the Ministry does what bureaucracies do best; deny, deny, deny...and try to keep things as they are. Think of Kevin Bacon at the end of "Animal House" crying "all is calm!" during the middle of a full scale riot.

To further their agenda, the Minister of Magic places his chief enabler in the position of "High Inquisitor" at the school, the appropriately named Dolores Umbridge, played by Imelda Staunton as a delightfully wicked combination of Queen Elizabeth II's diminutive size and fashion sense, Margaret Thatcher's resolution and passive/aggressive dominance, and the Marquis de

Sade's sense of justice and punishment. Staunton is wonderful in the role, all cheery smiles and even-keel voiced as her eyes flash pure bureaucratic menace. It is doubtful you'll meet a character that you'll despise more in any other movie this summer. Megatron from "Transformers" is a saint in comparison.

The messages are quite clear in this film in regards to how governments can lie to their people and manipulate the press. But don't necessarily make a comparison to how conditions are in the United States. This series always has been about Great Britain, where the press is much more tabloid, totally ruthless (see also: Diana, Princess) and much less concerned about the facts than they are a good story. However, one can draw parallels to both sides of the pond in terms of having government representatives attacking the messenger instead of the message, as both Harry and Dumbledore are painted as liars at best, seditious at worse, for their claim of the return of Voldemort.

As Umbridge assumes more and more control of Hogwarts, some of the students feel the need to strike out on their own. Umbridge tries to roll back the clock, refusing to allow the students to learn anything new or to practice any real spells that could be used in their defense. Take that as another slam against current events, where politicians try to control the content of a classroom based on their beliefs; acting as if teaching more than one viewpoint is a crime. To counter this, Harry, Hermione, and Ron recruit a group of students to train in secret, with Harry as their teacher.

Assistance also comes from the mysterious Order of the Phoenix, which was originally formed the last time Voldemort rose to power, and is composed of many of the characters we've encountered in previous movies. This provides an opportunity for some wonderful cameos by brilliant actors such as Brendon Gleason, Julie Waters, David Thewlis, George Harris, and, of course, Gary Oldman as Sirius Black, Harry's godfather.

But the focus, as stated, is more on Harry than any other film. His nightmares seem to be based on reality at times, and it is up to Dumbledore (Michael

Gambon) and Servius Snape (the ever droll and magnificent Alan Rickman) to interpret what they mean and how to save Harry. In watching these internal battles raging within Harry, I was struck by the similarities used this year by Sam Raimi and Tobey Maguire in "Spider-Man 3"...but I have to say that Radcliffe's performance was far superior. The anguish, pain, and confusion came across as convincingly as something you would expect from an actor with far greater experience. In one extraordinary scene, Harry's mind is being exploited by Voldemort, and Radcliffe's physical mannerisms mimicked Fiennes in a way that could only be described as "spooky".

This is the shortest of all the Harry Potter films, at 138 minutes, and due to that fact (and the higher emphasis on Harry), many of the other actors had substantially reduced roles; the largest slight going to Rupert Grint as Ron Weasley. Although Ron's loss was the gain of other students, with Hermione (Emma Watson), Neville Longbottom (Matthew Lewis), Cho Cheng (Katie Leung), Ginny Weasley (Bonnie Wright) and newcomer Luna Lovegood (Evanna Lynch) all strong in support as the core of "Dumbledore's Army".

But almost universally the adults, composed of great British actors, relished in their brief screen time and shone whenever they were seen. Not just Oldman, Rickman and Gambon, but also Ralph Fiennes as Art Modell...er...Lord Voldemort, Maggie Smith as Professor McGonagall, Emma Thompson as Professor Trelawney, and Helena Bonham Carter in full Beetlejuice mode as the evil Belletrix Lestrange. The climatic fight between the forces of good and evil is one of the most riveting scenes ever shown in this series.

Although there is resolution at the end, it is nothing more than a temporary reprieve, not a conclusion. This is a dark and foreboding movie, with only a few moments of mirth sprinkled in to keep it from resembling more of a supernatural thriller than a fantasy series. It is obviously not going to appeal to people that did not like how the tone has changed since Alfonso Cuarón first ramped up the tension in "The Prisoner of Azkaban". These films are now as different from the first two as "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy is different from "The Hobbit".

To me; that is a good thing, and I for one cannot wait until next year to see what happens next.

**My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).**